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ABSTRACT

The importance of experience in the development of reading readiness skills acquisition is a well-documented, thoroughly reviewed topic in education literature today. Aside from the specific subject area of experience, there is very little current discussion on reading readiness skills and their relationship to standardized readiness classroom evaluation. As discussed in this paper, there is a close relationship between experience and standardized evaluation that is not closely examined by early childhood educators. This paper builds a framework that will be useful for early childhood educators to use when assessing young children's reading readiness development. (Author/RH)

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The Importance of Experience and Standardized Educational Evaluation on Reading Readiness Skills Development

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Abstract

The importance of experience in the development of reading readiness skills acquisition is a well documented, thoroughly reviewed topic in the literature today. Aside from the specific subject area of experience, their is very little current discussion on reading readiness skills and their relationship to standardized readiness classroom evaluation. As discussed in this paper, their is a close relationship between experience and standardized evaluation that is not closely examined by early childhood educators. This paper builds a framework that will be useful for early educators to use when assessing young childrens reading readiness development.

The Importance of Experience and Standardized Educational Evaluation on Reading Readiness Skills Development

Beginning with the first day of school, the early childhood educator is haunted by the term "readiness", and more specifically, "reading readiness". The major thrust of instruction by the teacher in the early years of a child's schooling is reading. The the basic question that this paper addresses concerns the information the educator needs to take into consideration when assessing the child's reading readiness level.

When addressing this issue we must first look at how reading readiness is defined. Ausubel, in 1959, derived a definition of readiness which he stated as, "The adequacy of existing capacity in relation to demands of a given learning task." This definition of readiness was not restricted to reading but encompassed readiness for any and all learning.

Durkin (1982) on the other hand feels that each child's capacity at any given time is a product of the interplay among genetic endowment, maturation, experiences and learning. The child inherits his/her method of interaction that provides the biological equipment necessary for constructing a stable internal structure out of his/her experiences with the environment. However, no matter what one believes or what strategies one uses to "get the child ready", if the child is not developmentally ready to learn the task, he will not be able to accomplish the task at that particular point in time. This by no means

indicates failure on the part of the child. What it does indicate though is that he is physiologically incapable of processing the information.

This does not promote the viewpoint, however, that if you leave the child alone he will become "ready" for reading all by himself. On the contrary, Wood, Powell, and Knight (1984) in a recent study, have found that the chronological age of children entering kindergarten in the age range of 4-6 years, is unrelated to success or failure. Instead, careful attention to and understanding of developmental differences in children of the same chronological age appear to be one of the best ways to guarantee a successful school and reading career.

Our next question would then be, What does the child need to have (in terms of skills and cognitive strategies), in order to be able to read? First, the child must have a wide experiential background. Children use opportunities to interact with objects in the environment to abstract various physical properties of objects. According to Piaget, by utilizing these opportunities, a child constructs an internal representation of the world. The manner in which he constructs this representation, in the beginning of his quest for knowledge is through overt actions. Knowledge that the child gains through physical manipulation of his environment is knowledge that the child discovers for himself (Piaget, 1952).

As an example, the physical manipulation involved in play serves that distinct purpose which provides a sequence of

practical knowledge that helps to coordinate movements and organize behavior (Rosensweig, 1971). Therefore, teachers of young children should be concerned not only with experiences per se, but also with the immediate effect of the experience on the child, and the potential impact in terms of the child's future development (Dewey, 1959). The second prerequisite a child must have for reading is that the child must have a large conceptual network. The experiences that a child accumulates during the day should provide ample opportunities for vocabulary development and the development of ideas or concepts associated with these new words.

Underlying these two prerequisites is the ability or the basic skill that the child must have to express ideas and ask questions. The combination of the necessary language tools and experiences can bring about stimulating challenges and conflicts in the child's encounter with his environment. These challenges produce modifications in the central structures. Through probing and prompting, asking questions, and repeated dialogue with adults and other children, the child can resolve this conflict and attain a higher level of equilibrium thus advancing the child's learning. As part and parcel of the need for the child to have expressive language is the need for the child to have opportunities for verbal interaction with parents and teachers. The adults in the child's life should elaborate on the child's utterances. Explanations and comments should be forthcoming to the child, which confirm or disprove the concept (idea) in

question. With this point in mind, it is vitally important to give the child as much information as he can understand that is pertinent to the situation. This also aids the child in learning to make inferences, which is essential in learning to read. When parents and teachers expand rather than restrict the child's ideas and questions, they are teaching the child how to talk and more importantly how to think.

Finally, the child must understand the link between spoken and written speech. Through exposure to books and the print and pictures within them, a child becomes aware that images on paper do have meaning and can be understood. Children need concrete, first-hand experiences with books, and they also need a large conceptual network, expressive language, and interaction and dialogue with adults to give a sound and solid foundation for reading.

Concret experience does not imply that the teacher should constantly use ditto's and workbooks which are based on drill and rote memory instruction. Research has never given any support to the contention that workbooks and work sheets that have children perform tasks such as matching geometrical shapes and forms, adding to shapes and forms to make them look like others-and so on, help children succeed with beginning reading (Durkin, 1982). And yet regardless of this fact most early elementary teachers continue to use workbooks and worksheets and drill children in rote memory fashion thinking that this is the "BEST" way for children to learn.

The fact that reading readiness is a process that develops over a long period of time, warrants the need for early childhood educators to constantly prepare children for reading, in all areas of development. To reiterate an earlier comment preschool children need continuous exposure to pre-reading experiences and they need multiple opportunities to practice skills needed for reading. Early childhood educators cannot passively sit back and wait for reading to happen. When a child is developmentally ready to read they will, and as a teacher you must see to it that you provide the early experiences necessary and crucial to enhancing the development of reading.

Early childhood educators need to be made aware of the important factors which will help build the all-important foundations for reading. The fundamental way for early childhood educators to assess the reading level of children involves implementing standardized reading readiness tests, which clearly illustrate and test for many important task appropriate skills critical for beginning reading. A review of four readiness tests (The Harrison-Stroud Reading Readiness Profile, the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Lee-Clark Reading Readiness Test, and the Metropolitan Test) characterizes what reading specialists viewed in the past as important precursors to reading. These characteristics, by test, are as follows:

(1) The Harrison-Stroud Reading Readiness Profile. (1956)

This test was designed to measure specific readiness skills that are required in the initial period. The five subtests and

one individual test measures childrens ability in: 1) using symbols

2) making visual discriminations

a) attention span controlled

b) attention span uncontrolled

3) using the context

4) making auditory discriminations

5) using context and auditory clues

6) giving names of the letters.

(2) Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test-Readiness Skills. (1968)

Measures eight areas-those subtests are:

1) listening comprehension

2) auditory discrimination

3) visual discrimination

4) following directions

5) letter recognition

6) visual- motor coordination

7) auditory blending

8) word recognition.

(3) Lee-Clark Reading Readiness Test (1962)

Measurement in three subtest areas.

1) Letter symbols

2) concepts

3) word symbols

(4) Metropolitan Readiness Test (1976)

Seven different subtests at level I measuring:

1) auditory memory

2) rhyming

3) letter recognition

4) visual matching

5) school language and listening

6) quantitative language (size, shape, number quantity).

7) copying

Level II

1) beginning consonants

2) sound letter correspondence

3) visual matching

4) finding patterns

5) school language

The acquisition of the skills listed in some of these tests are critical aspects of reading readiness, but they are not comprehensive. Other essential readiness activities can be, and must be provided in a child's life at an early age. These readiness tests can be quite beneficial to an early childhood educator if they are used in the correct manner-as a diagnostic tool for assessment and evaluation of each individual child's pre-reading ability. Most of the time this is not how these tests are used.

Politics in the school system call for school administrations to place too much faith in test scores (Durkin,1982). Readiness tests fit in that exact molded category and as such are used in a negative manner. Rude (1973) noted the fact that readiness tests

are believed to add reliability to teacher judgement. Teachers will use them to add fuel to the fire if they have any negative concerns regarding reading abilities of young children.

Durkin (1982) asserts that, "authors of readiness tests commonly describe subtest scores as a source of help in diagnosing particular strengths and weakness. Instruction can then build on the strengths and work on the weaknesses." Stated theoretically this proposal is sound, but practical application does test its limitations. First of all test authors are in disagreement about what, "constitutes essential subskills for beginning reading" (Durkin, 1982). If a teacher based expectations on low or high scores the delivery of reading curriculum to each child would be confounded. Other flaws in these readiness tests include: no ready remedies for children lacking tested ability, lack of reliability with the limited number of items in a subtest, tests fail to recognize that different kinds of instruction require different abilities and understanding, tests ignore that how a given kind of instruction is carried on also affects what is required for success, and the fact that readiness tests are based on unresearched assumptions.

Again, reading readiness tests do not test all areas of child development necessary for acquiring reading skills. At best readiness test are only diagnostic tools and clearly must be used that way. If a teacher tests a class with any one of these tests and observes that 80% of his/her children scored low in visual discrimination then the curriculum could be adjusted to build

skills in that specific area of pre-reading development.

In her article titled Language Development Factors Related to Reading (1983), Irene Athey points out that, ..."early reading and writing should be no more formal than early speaking. They should be introduced without fanfare when and as the occasion demands." She too, acknowledges the importance of early experience and comments that before first grade, "the child should bring to reading not only a wealth of experience, informal training in reasoning, an extensive grasp of the language and its uses, but also familiarity with books and writing implements as communication tools"(Athey, 1983).

Rude (1983) suggests that as an educator of young children it is important that you personally operationally define reading readiness for your classroom. Each year you will have a different group of children with diverse experiences and varied past exposure to necessary pre-reading developmental skills. Research literature notes that children's knowledge level of reading at school entry is very different and that children learn to read at different rates(Mason, 1980). Based on that premise you should adjust your goals and arrange or rearrange your reading readiness curriculum to meet the individual needs of each unique child in your classroom and meet the global needs of the classroom as a whole.

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